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COMMENT: Ugly gap in Detroit's riverfront rejuvenation will soon close

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BY U.S. SEN. CARL LEVIN

Today we will break ground to overcome the barrier between east and west that has long been a major impediment to the re-emergence of the Detroit riverfront. The so-called Bates Street Outfall is 220 feet wide, but it might as well be 2 miles wide. "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," wrote Rudyard Kipling more than a century ago. This tiny stretch of Detroit riverfront proved him right -- until now.

The Bates Street Outfall is a part of the city's combined sewage overflow system. It flows into the Detroit River between the Renaissance Center and the riverfront walkway. The outfall is an eyesore at the river's edge -- gurgling and ugly -- in the midst of an aggressive riverfront revitalization and beautification effort. It is also a structural liability, slowly eroding from the waves and undermining the stability of nearby buildings.

Some of the riverfront walkway is now installed, going east from the Bates Street Outfall. West of the outfall, the walkway now goes through Hart Plaza and to Joe Louis Arena.

It was obvious we needed to connect the east and west sides of the riverfront, but we had no idea how difficult it would prove to be. These projects take time, energy and money -- and have been in the works for more than 30 years, dating to my service on the City Council. Rolling up our sleeves, we got some federal funding, including money to stabilize the shoreline. We got the parties controlling the outfall to agree on the need for a change. We cut the miles of red tape surrounding the project. And after four long years, it is finally happening. First, we will have the groundbreaking. Then, in about five months, east and west shall be joined on our river, and another step will be taken to recapture our unique riverfront for public use and public access.

Eventually, we hope to have a continuous riverfront promenade from the Ambassador Bridge to the McArthur Bridge at Belle Isle. Our waterfront will also provide adjacent housing and recreational green

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space, and many wonderful activities that are possible at a river's edge. Detroiters will walk and ride bicycles along the river, play basketball and skate in adjacent parks, fish in the river, and hold picnics on the green.

Detroit's riverfront is being transformed from a neglected industrial wasteland to a beautiful space for our people and a national tourist destination, competing with waterfront communities such as Boston and Baltimore. Indeed, developments such as the ship passenger terminal and dock that will soon be constructed by the Detroit-Wayne County Port Authority will also make Detroit's riverfront a welcoming water gateway for tourists from all over the world.

Bridging the Bates Street Outfall is a big step in this transformation. I hope it will be a symbol for a greater unification of our city. Detroiters living on the west side have long felt lost on the east side. And those on the east side have felt lost on the west side. Although the diagonals Gratiot and Grand River are enough to discombobulate anyone, the problem is more complicated than streets on a map. We will bridge a historic divide at the riverfront.

Special thanks are due to General Motors for its vision and tenacity as the driving force in stimulating Detroit riverfront development. Thanks as well to the City of Detroit, the County of Wayne, the State of Michigan and all the local foundations, businesses and neighborhood organizations that joined arms to bring the vision of a Detroit riverfront recaptured for our people closer to reality.

Hallelujah! The twain shall finally meet.

CARL LEVIN is a Democrat U.S. senator from Detroit. He was a Detroit City Council member 1969-'73, and council president 1974-'77. Write to him in care of the Free Press Editorial Page, 600 W. Fort St., Detroit, MI 48226.

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